

## Book Reviews

HAPPENINGS AND HEARSAY: EXPERIENCES OF A BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGIST. By Gabriel W. Lasker. Detroit: Savoyard Books, Wayne State University Press. 1999. ISBN 0-8143-2840-7. \$30.00 (cloth).

*Happenings and Hearsay* is an autobiography by Gabriel W. Lasker, one of the key players in biological anthropology in the second half of the 20th century. We should thank Professor Lasker for having taken the time to write lucidly about his experiences and impressions; I hope other senior colleagues will follow his lead. Reading this short book is not a substitute for a history of physical anthropology, but it is a very useful complement: it provides specific examples and singular perspectives, and it enlivens historical moments. I only wish that Gabe Lasker had written more and in greater depth.

Twenty-three short chapters ranging from 14 to as few as 3 pages form the core of this scientific autobiography. The first 10 chapters are in rough chronological sequence, starting with Lasker's early years in rural England to his first years on the faculty at Wayne State and as editor of *Human Biology*. The first three chapters focus on his life before graduate school, including time as an impressionable youth in China. The next four chapters center on his experiences in graduate school at Harvard, starting in 1937 with Earnest Hooton and others. The next three are brief retrospectives on the early part of his professional career. This section of the book is a somewhat nostalgic view through Lasker's eyes of life before and soon after World War II, and the considerably smaller and less inclusive world of biological anthropology around mid-century. What I particularly appreciated was the sense of how an individual chooses and is chosen by a calling.

As Michael Little notes in his foreword, one theme of this autobiography is changing ideas about human variation and race. Hav-

ing been born in England in 1912, to a family already well-assimilated, Lasker notes that he had no sense of being Jewish. At Harvard he makes a series of remarks on the racial views of professors (including Hooton, Carleton Coon, and R. Ruggles Gates) and of his fellow students (Jo Birdsall, Larry Angel, and Stanley Garn, to name a few). His recollections of the views of others are both frank and charitable. He seems to ascribe individuals' views on race to be products of their time and social milieu, and to be influenced by the relative centrality of race in areas within biological anthropology. For example, he notes that Larry Angel is one of the few students after the Second World War to continue using race as a research tool. Lasker wonders if Angel's retaining race is related to his focus in skeletal biology and forensics and the influences of senior colleagues at the Smithsonian Institution (p. 93).

As for his own views and their origins, Lasker relates that early on he was agnostic regarding racial differences in intelligence. How he adopted this view is never really addressed. However, in the first chapters we find that Lasker's father was a prolific intellectual and that one of his books was on race awareness in children. Lasker also notes how a sort of game of trying to guess the origin of a skull in Hooton's laboratory at Harvard quickly impressed upon him the difficulties of racial typology. "On average, there are clear differences, but individuals vary greatly" (p. 45).

The second half of the book is more thematically organized. Most of these chapters focus around people and places. In fact, *People and Places* might be a more apt title than *Happenings and Hearsay*. It is obvious that personal interactions, a mixing of the social and the intellectual, have been very important. People show up in nearly every paragraph. What one senses is just how important planned research collaborations and even casual conversations in the halls at meetings have been to Lasker. I particularly like this take.

One chapter is on Bernice "Bunny" Kaplan, an anthropologist and Gabriel Lasker's wife. This is a short tribute, and it made me realize how little there is on Lasker's nonacademic life and his family. Gabriel apologizes for such a small entry on his wife and, indeed, I would have appreciated the opportunity to read more about his reflections on a 50-year marriage and intellectual partnership.

There are lots of additional recollections of fieldwork and collaborations. Full chapters are devoted to his fieldwork in Mexico, Peru, and Britain, and smaller sections cover collaborations in Italy, Denmark, and Eastern Europe. Lasker focuses not only on what he did, but on the people he met along the way, and the state of the discipline in each country. The account on Mexico should be useful reading to individuals who are not aware of the rich history of physical anthropology in that country or of Professor Juan Comas and Dr. Santiago Genoves, its colorful and very different founding fathers.

An imbedded theme concerns support for research and teaching in physical anthropology. Lasker notes how important the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research has been to anthropology in general and to him in particular. The Wenner-Gren Foundation funded his early research and essentially gave him his start in the field. One of the most engaging parts of this autobiography centers on the Viking Fund Summer Seminars in Physical Anthropology that occurred for a few years at the Wenner-Gren headquarters in New York. The first seminar in 1946 lasted for 6 weeks, and the second for a month. Lasker notes that these seminars were key to the development of the new physical anthropology: it is here that Washburn honed his ideas. According to Lasker, nearly all the old guard came for at least part of the seminar. Even more amazing, most of the advanced students and all the recent Ph.D.s in physical anthropology were there for the full time. Wow! How things have changed.

There are few conflicts and controversies to be found in this book, and even when Lasker treads on controversial grounds he does so lightly. For example, in discussing the development of the Human Adaptability

Project of the International Biology Program, Lasker writes that he supported the program, and indeed his work helped to launch it. However, he voices concern that it will be a funding sink. Although funds from the National Science Foundation were to come from a separate line, Lasker wonders if funding will still be reduced for other areas of physical anthropology (p. 181). This controversy parallels concerns for funding of the Human Genome Diversity Project of the 1990s.

The flip side of the small world of physical anthropology, so nicely captured in the paragraphs on the Viking Fund Summer Seminars, is exclusivity. Lasker writes apologetically that nearly all of his collaborators have been men. In fact, there were very few women physical anthropologists while he moved up through the ranks. He writes about how Alice Brues, already a student at Radcliffe when he arrived at Harvard, had to sit in the open doorway to hear Hooton's lectures. She could not sit in the lecture hall because Harvard accepted only men. Lasker notes that for the longest time Montague Cobb was the only African-American physical anthropologist. In 1954, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) scheduled meetings in segregated hotels in Atlanta. Bunny Kaplan led a protest, and eventually a resolution was passed by the AAAS never to meet again in segregated hotels. The hotels of Atlanta were integrated soon afterwards.

Is this book great literature? No. Is it spellbinding? No. Is it still worth reading? Yes, very much so. I recommend that all physical anthropologists read *Happenings and Hearsay*. This autobiography of a wonderful senior colleague may be a useful supplemental text in a course on the history of physical anthropology. It will provide a useful glimpse into the development of one career and of one science. That the career is of a distinguished physical anthropologist is reason enough to read this book. That the science is our own is the clincher.

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## BOOKS RECEIVED

- Bogin B (1999) *Patterns of Human Growth*, 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press. 455 pp. \$39.95 (paper).
- Corcos AF (1997) *The Myth of Human Races*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press. 214 pp. \$17.95 (paper).
- Hudson M, and Levine BA (eds.) (1999) *Urbanization and Land Ownership in the Ancient Near East*. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. 495 pp. \$35.00 (paper).
- Lee PC (ed.) (1999) *Comparative Primate Socioecology*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 412 pp. \$74.95 (cloth).